

Glimpses of God  
Mark 9:2-9 – Transfiguration  
Feb. 26, 2006  
Kory Wilcoxson

I was a very inquisitive young lad growing up. I had this thirst for knowledge which was so strong that it could be annoying. I remember one time when my mom, stepfather, and I were driving around Washington D.C., I peppered him with all kinds of questions about the monuments and presidents and American history. Finally, he turned around and shouted, “Do you do anything besides ask questions?” To which I responded, “What’s wrong with questions?” At which point he jumped from the moving car.

This natural curiosity is probably what led me into my first career of journalism. I had questions, I wanted answers, and I expected that every question had an answer. Journalism was fulfilling for me because I was getting paid to ask questions and to search until I find the answers.

That’s about the time I started getting seriously involved in church, and a whole new realm of question-asking was opened up to me, especially when it came to the Bible. I knew virtually nothing about the book, and it was fascinating to me. Here were all these wonderful stories and characters that were told about God, and they were just waiting to be read about and analyzed and questioned. The answers to all my questions about faith were in there, just waiting to be discovered. I was in Heaven, so to speak.

That’s one of the things I enjoy most about preaching. I love taking a biblical passage and diving into it, swimming around in the context and the metaphors and the author’s mindset. And most of the Bible lends itself to this kind of investigation. In seminary we called this process exegesis. I love exegeting a passage and then sharing the results with you in the sermon. I enjoy exploring the background and the meaning of the original languages and coming out with some clarity. It gives me hope that maybe I can understand the Bible at the level that I want to understand it.

But then, there are other passages in the Bible that drive the journalist in me crazy, because there are no set answers, and trying to perform exegesis is like trying to dig a hole in a rock quarry with a plastic shovel. These passages teach me that sometimes there aren’t any answers. In our Tuesday morning Bible study we’re about to finish the book of Revelation, and nothing will cure you of your desire to understand the Bible faster than studying Revelation! Our motto in that group has become, “But ultimately, we just don’t know.”

Today’s passage, known as the Transfiguration, is another one of those passages. There are certainly some things we can know about this mountaintop experience, but very quickly we reach the top of our bell curve of understanding, and it’s all down-hill (or down-mountain?) from there.

So, before we talk about what we don’t know, let’s see what we do know. We know that at the end of chapter 8, Jesus has predicted his death to his disciples for the first time. We know that in a short time, Jesus will set his course for Jerusalem and the beginning of the Passion story. We know that Peter, John, and James, who go with Jesus up the mountain, were three of Jesus’ closest disciples, the same ones he will invite to watch over him in Gethsemane.

We know that anytime someone climbs a mountain in the Bible, something divine is going to happen. Moses climbed a mountain and returned with the 10 commandments. Solomon built the great Temple on top of a mountain. Mountains were often places where God was revealed in much more glorious ways than on flat land.

What else can we know? We certainly know who Moses and Elijah are. In this story, Moses represents the Torah, the Hebrew law, and Elijah represents the Hebrew prophets. Their presence in a sense sums up the totality of the Hebrew scriptures, and points to Jesus as the fulfillment of those scriptures, the Messiah promised by God. In the midst of Jesus' predictions of his death, the Transfiguration is a picture of who Jesus truly was; it was a statement about his true identity.

That's what we know, as far as I know. Does that leave you as frustrated as it does me? I want to know so much more here. I want to understand what happens to Jesus while he's up on that mountain; I want to know what it means that he was transfigured. I want to capture this experience, put it in a jar, run some tests.

I'm not unlike Peter in that sense. Peter must have been a journalist at some point in his life, because he has a strong curiosity. Remember, he's the one who ventured out of the boat and tried to walk on water to meet Jesus. On this mountain top, an extraordinary event was unfolding, and Peter, who was the vice president in charge of doing something, had to do something. When you're confronted with such an awesome experience, don't you feel like you have to do something?

In this passage, Peter and the disciples are simply overwhelmed by what they are seeing. These men are getting a rare glimpse of Christ revealed in his full glory. How do you respond to those moments in life when God seems intimately present, those moments when God seems real? In the Celtic tradition, they are called the "thin places," moments in which the veil between heaven and earth is made see-through for just a moment. In the Hebrew scriptures it's called the Shekinah, the radiance of God shining through into this dark world. I think about my wedding day, the birth of my children, the day of my ordination, my grandfather's funeral. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that in this life we see God as if we are seeing through a glass dimly. These are moments when God takes out the Windex, and for just a fleeting moment we see the world as God created it to be. These are divine moments, they are moments that defy classification or description, and they are simply overwhelming.

I think Peter's response is perfectly human in both its eagerness and in its bone-headedness. Peter sees Jesus, Moses, and Elijah before him and says, "Wow, this is great! Hey, I've got an idea. Let's set up some tents so we can all rest here awhile and talk." Peter is offering a human response in the face of a divine moment; he's trying to capture the uncaptureable; he's trying to contain the uncontainable.

We all do this, don't we? Our technological age invites this kind of behavior. Leigh and I honeymooned in Florida, and one day we went to the Universal Studios theme park. They had this great new ride there based on the Terminator movies. We stood in line for about an hour, and while waiting, I decided I wanted to videotape the entire ride so that we would remember it. So when we got into place I started the video camera and filmed the entire thing. And now, when I watch that videotape, do you know what I remember? I remember videotaping the ride, but I don't remember the ride itself.

Let me give you another example. Molly is learning to say "Cheese!" and I have to say as an unbiased observer that it's absolutely adorable. I'll hold up the digital camera

and look at the little screen, and she'll say "Cheese!" and then I'll take a picture. And when I look at the picture now, do you know what I remember about that experience? I remember taking the picture of Molly saying "Cheese!" but I don't remember looking at the cute little scrunched up face.

Like Peter, we are so concerned about keeping the moment from passing that we pass the moment. The story of the Transfiguration is meant to be enjoyed, to be wondered about, to be relished with delight rather than picked apart and meticulously interpreted. That same goes for all the precious moments in our lives where God breaks into the mundane and gives us a glimpse of the holy.

What I'm encouraging is something that I myself have difficulty with: the acceptance and appreciation of the mysteries of life. Christianity is a revealed religion. We learn by what is revealed to us, not by what we think up or discover on our own. That's what the voice from the cloud tells us: "This is my son, whom I love. Listen to him!" There are times in life where it's appropriate to ask questions, but then there are other times, transcendent moments that defy explanation, where all we need to do is to listen to what God is saying to us through this experience.

Three years ago, my grandmother, my dad's mom, visited us at Halloween. While I had been around my grandma all my life, I'd never really spent a long period of time with her. I remember one night, she and I were sitting on the couch, and I started asking her about her childhood and how she met my grandfather. And she opened up in a way I had never seen before. In a sense, she was transfigured as she transported me back to that time. I wanted to grab a notebook and start writing things down, but instead I just sat there and listened. She died two months later, and I am so thankful that I had that time simply being in the presence of my grandmother.

I'm not denouncing the asking of questions and the seeking of explanations, but sometimes the limits of our human intellect demand that we stop seeking answers and instead honor the sacredness of the moment before us, abide in the thin place, bask in the Shekinah. Every once in awhile we are blessed to experience a moment, whether joyous or tragic, that is so God-filled that all we can do is simply be there. Don't work so hard to preserve the moment that you miss the moment, whether it's with God or your family or in the act of worship. I believe there are moments all around us where God is being revealed to us, through grandmothers and grandchildren, through sunsets and snowfalls, through songs and prayers and scripture. Please don't miss them. Stop, listen, enjoy, and give thanks.